

Testimony in Favor of Baccalaureate Programs in Applied Areas by Michigan Community Colleges (HB 4837)

**By Georgia Fojtasek, Ph.D., President and CEO of Allegiance Health, Jackson, Michigan
To the Committee on Education**

October 29, 2009

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Good morning. My name is Georgia Fojtasek. I am the President and CEO of Allegiance Health, located principally in Jackson, Michigan with clinical outreach in Washtenaw, Calhoun, Hillsdale, Lenawee and Ingham counties. I come before this committee today to speak in favor of allowing Michigan's community colleges to offer baccalaureate programs in applied areas (HB 4837). More specifically, my testimony will encompass allowing Michigan's community colleges to offer BSN (bachelor of science-nursing) programs.

Before I proceed, I would like to provide you with some context about my background. I began my career in healthcare as a Registered Nurse. I advanced through a variety of positions including direct patient care and ultimately hospital administration. I have served as the President of Allegiance Health the last 15 years. Additionally, I'm the past Chair of the Michigan Health and Hospital Association as well as a past Board member of Jackson Community College. I hold a doctorate in Higher Education. I believe that this background – as a former student, former practicing nurse, past chair of our state hospital association board and member of our local Community College Board and as an active hospital president in addition to my graduate work in higher education provides me with a unique perspective on this issue.

My key message for this committee is that Michigan community colleges should have elective authority to offer BSN programs based upon their solid attention to instructional quality, as demonstrated by the graduates who have joined Allegiance Health, and by our observation through the clinical opportunities we provide to students. Additionally, I know that our community colleges can help meet the significant current demand for BSNs and the increasing demand posed by many impending retirements. This need for baccalaureate Registered Nurses cannot be met by the current system alone. Leaving BSN preparation to our state's four-year colleges and universities alone will not meet our needs, let alone be of best service to students in our area. It is also important to note that the needs of the health care industry have changed now such that the entry level requirement is for BSN versus associate degree Registered Nurses (ADNs). I will further address each of these points.

First, although not exclusively, Jackson Community College has been the principal provider of ADN nurses at Allegiance Health. These students have distinguished themselves in their clinical experiences, in their demeanor, bedside manner and technical skills as practicing RNs. Their preparation is significant, as demonstrated by JCC state board of nursing pass rates, which this past quarter were 97.7% (42 out of 43) for Registered Nurses, when the national average is only 88.2%. JCC is routinely in the 95-100% state board pass rates on the first attempt.

Allegiance Health is so pleased with this relationship with JCC that the College and the Hospital have formed what I believe to be the state's first corporate university with a community hospital. This results in not only the College providing training and education for nursing students, but also other allied health and staff development. Allegiance Health recognizes Jackson Community College's quality not only in terms of the data I have just shared, but also with its checkbook. Allegiance Health pays the salaries for 2.33 FTE nursing and allied health faculty at Jackson Community College.

Jackson Community College is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, which more than meets the needs of our Hospital for accreditation requirements. Allegiance Health does not require the optional accreditation of NLN or CCNE of its educational institutions, whether two-year or four-year. At Allegiance Health we regularly benchmark ourselves with peers

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nationally as part of our accreditation requirements with The Joint Commission on Hospital Accreditation. We perform very well on these reviews and are routinely recognized for performance in the top decile of hospitals nationally.

Secondly, I'd like you to consider just how important talented nursing students from Jackson Community College are to our organization. Out of 3,500 staff at Allegiance Health, 753 are RNs. Many of these RNs are eligible for retirement today. We also know that a significant number are potentially at risk due to the unemployment of a spouse, relocation for other family needs, etc. Consequently, Allegiance Health, as a community health provider, is in significant need of a continuous source of qualified nursing graduates. Our local community college is key to helping us fill this need.

Thirdly, Allegiance Health has made a decision to move away from the entry level employment of associate degree prepared RNs to BSNs. A strategic focus for us is a minimum 50% BSN ratio this year—we are currently at 46% with notable improvement in our care outcomes. When we started down this path 5 years ago, we had 9% BSN prepared RN's. The acuity level of our patients now requires this level of education to ensure the critical thinking and depth of knowledge to collaborate with physicians and other caregivers in meeting patient needs.

Allegiance is not alone in this transition away from associate degree RNs. The Veteran's Administration and other hospitals are moving quickly with this transition. The state and national associations of nursing executives also support this position noting that the "nurse of the future should be at the baccalaureate level because this level of education teaches the nurse to function as an equal partner, collaborator and manager of the complex patient care journey."

The need for BSN's is greater than the supply. The State of Michigan is regularly recruiting RNs from Canada in order to meet critical demand. As baby boomers retire in increasing numbers, this demand will be more pronounced than ever in our country. Any delay in increasing the number of BSN students will be a significant issue in meeting the health care needs of our state.

Finally, as the former Chair of the Enterprise Group of Jackson, our region's economic development agency, as a former member of the Jackson Community College Board and with my background in higher education, I strongly believe that community colleges must have the authority to meet the needs of their communities and their surrounding areas. This is essential for restoring economic vitality and competitiveness to the region.

Only 16% of Jackson County residents hold a college degree. I routinely witness the hunger that our citizens have for continuing their education, recognizing that the new world requires post high school education. Our partnership with Jackson Community College allows us to offer access to this education and it is gradually making a difference in the productive capacity of our people and enabling them to achieve their full potential. This contributes, in part, to our dreams of restoring Michigan's luster.

I ask you to carefully consider and approve the community colleges' request for offering baccalaureate programs in applied areas, particularly as it relates to the BSN.

I will be glad to respond to any questions you may have regarding this issue.